

Gazing At The Border From Sintok: Images Of The Tourist Space*

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Abstract

This paper begins by describing border tourism within a 9A abstraction framework, with a focus on the drivers and barriers to growth with particular attention to knowledge gaps in the above nine development factors. This leads to a discussion on research possibilities and their implications on joint cross-border institutional initiatives. The next section then identifies potential areas for academic collaboration with an emphasis on high potential doable areas for immediate attention such as a joint publication of edited volume on cross-border tourism, joint research project on tourism development in the Malaysian-Thai border region, and formal/informal student or colleageal exchange programs. The final section concludes with an expression of hope and an earnest call for concerted efforts to encourage border tourism research as an important part of the IMT-GT policy and planning for tourism.

Introduction

Tourism managers, particularly those vested with the task of marketing destinations, usually assume that potential visitors can be persuaded to visit a place through promotional efforts that spread positive ideas about the place. The premise is that if potential travelers can be convinced to come they will, notwithstanding the fact that ideas on convincing itself can be very subjective and that tourist's taste and preferences can vary widely across market segments. Dark, thana or adventure tourists for examples may not like highly sanitized images promoted in the mainstream media. They may opt for the more spontaneous images disseminated by fact-book type of publications such as the Lonely Planet series, or even the travel blogger websites. Indeed, tourist surveys frequently indicate very low percentages of those who rely on advertisements and tourist brochures when choosing a holiday destination. One of the reasons that explain the popularity of travel guide is that readers know the authors are not making profit by telling about a place or facility in a certain way. There are merely trying to provide the most current information about what the traveler might encounter with respect to satisfying their needs during a visit to the place. That kind of information is clearly guesswork, hopefully a good one because the visitor is likely to rely on it for his/her 'ontological security' a feel of confidence which will make him/her feel at home away from home.

In this paper I propose to imagine an agenda for research based on a long standing neglect of the border as a tourist site worthy of investigation. Like any other domain of imagination (e.g. imagined communities), my imaginations are not entirely free wheeling but rather a result of some dreamy reflection on the space on the other side of the border, guided by ideas drawn from interpretative works, especially that by Urry (2000) on the tourist 'gaze' and Timothy (2006) on tourism and international boundaries. According to Urry, "...the visual sense has been especially significant in organizing the development of Western tourism since the end of the eighteenth century" (p. 246).

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Although the word 'tourist' came into popular use only in the 1820s, Begbie (1834: 379) was already describing tourist sight-seeing in Penang (then regarded as the 'Pearl of the Orient') in 1834. Since then there have been considerable documentation of the tourist gaze either by the visitor herself or by others who sought to promote such gazing activities. Skeat's descriptions following a trip across the Malay Peninsular from Penang to Pattani some fifty years later belong to the flaneur category in which the gaze was enacted from the lens of the elite (Skeat 1899). In such travelogues or diaries references to the negative and positive aspects of a place are often included. If one reads the works of such travelers from the early times to the present, one cannot escape noticing the dynamic nature of the tourist gaze which evolves in coverage, to some extent influenced by technological changes and the socio-political context at the destination. Nonetheless the fact remains that all travelers must fulfill the basic needs to be away from home in terms of food and drink, accommodation, information, entertainment, social company, security, safety and so on. From the tourist's point of view there are a number of place attributes that affect the quality of visitor's enjoyment or satisfaction of visiting the place. This must be clearly understood. The scenario at the border in July 1953 was poignant. The border was relatively porous. The then Assistant Comptroller of Immigration wrote to the State Secretary:

"I have the honour to request that the barbed wire fence near the Immigration Control gate Changloon be extended for the full length of the new village frontage so as to keep the villagers, their children, pigs, fowl etc. from entering the Immigration and Customs checking area.

2. It is essential for a good check of passengers and luggage that the villagers be kept away from the checking area which at present they enter freely" (SUK Fail 66/73, 11 July 1953).

According to Kuroda (n.d. p.2), there was no boundary prior to the border treaty of 1909 and in 1920s-1930s the Kedah Police and Border Force were not able to provide security at the border. Kedah was more notorious as a "bandit" country with cow robbers controlling the border areas with impunity. The situation has changed drastically, the above quotations indicate that the border scene has changed and will continue to change. To be sure traveler needs may have changed in form but less so in substance.

As a corollary to that planners and developers must accordingly attend to these attributes if the goal is to achieve sustainable development of the destination. To facilitate memory the nine attributes may be conveniently described in a 9A framework as outlined below.

Nine Factors in Destination Development

A destination can grow only if the site is **attractive** enough in terms of possessing a spectacular feature or a combination of features, natural or manmade, that can draw the tourist gaze. There has to be convenient **access** so that tourists can go near without too much discouraging hassle on the way. The site has to be **available** at all times meaning there is no restrictions to visitors. Sintok, for example, was not available during the Emergency period owing to security reasons. In recent past Sungai Golok was on the Australian government travel advisory as a place to be avoided at all cost. Even if the above three factors are not in the way, cost considerations can be a barrier. In this respect both Malaysia and Thailand are **affordable** destinations. But Danok across the

Malaysian border may be priced out on account of the cross-border regulation that mandates possession of an international passport for Malaysians who were not born in the neighboring states.

The presence of an **agency** with some semblance of authority is a requirement so that decisions can be made to get the primary stakeholders to work towards a common purpose of ensuring a sustainable development in a coordinated fashion. Such a body needs to be led by trusted leadership who is **accountable**, meaning minimal power abuse and corruptible practices, especially in the treatment of foreigners. **Awareness** is a factor that applies to all other attributes...from awareness of available attractions to awareness of rules, community sensitivities etc. Indeed, a common administrative pattern worldwide is to strategize marketing and promotional programs largely designed to create awareness of the destination in the target market. Awareness of sensitivities surrounding the host-guest or visitor-resident encounter is rarely given the attention it deserves. In line with Plog's irridex model resident attitudes to tourists is important and should be periodically monitored so that tourism will continue to be **acceptable** to the host community. Bombing episodes in Bali and Jakarta, attack mounted against tourist buses in Cairo and the less publicized protest among the Mulu longhouse residents a decade ago, suggest that community acceptability can not be taken for granted. Finally, the core value of hospitality is **attentiveness** as service quality specialists would agree. That smile and those small gestures of kindness (often reciprocated by generous tips), can be memorable. This factor alone seems to have left Malaysia a few paces behind Thailand.

The above 9A abstraction was intended to facilitate student memory of the critical factors in destination development. The idea was that tourism planners and managers must always be mindful of the **big picture** which is always more than a tendentious focus on promoting a good destination image. Delivery of what is being promoted is just as important. This is clearly intuitive reasoning, there has got to be some effort to ascertain its validity and only careful research efforts can contribute to that goal. Table 2 presents images of tourist space in the vicinity of the Bukit Kayu Hitam (BKH) immigration checkpoint. To each attribute there are positive and negative aspects associated with the destination. We can assume the positive aspects to function in concert as drivers that can propel BKH into a popular border destination. On the downside the negative factors can act as big drags, or barriers that may impede growth of the center no matter how much planning expertise and political will that is put into the development process.

Bukit Kayu Hitam (Population ~6,000)

Bukit Kayu Hitam is currently the third busiest gateway after Johor Baharu and KLIA. It received the largest stream of tourists (41.4%) crossing the seven Malaysian-Thai border check points (Table 1. Bukit Bunga was declared open in December 2007, hence not included in the Table).

Table 1. Tourist arrival from top 20 sources at the Malaysian-Thai border, 2007.

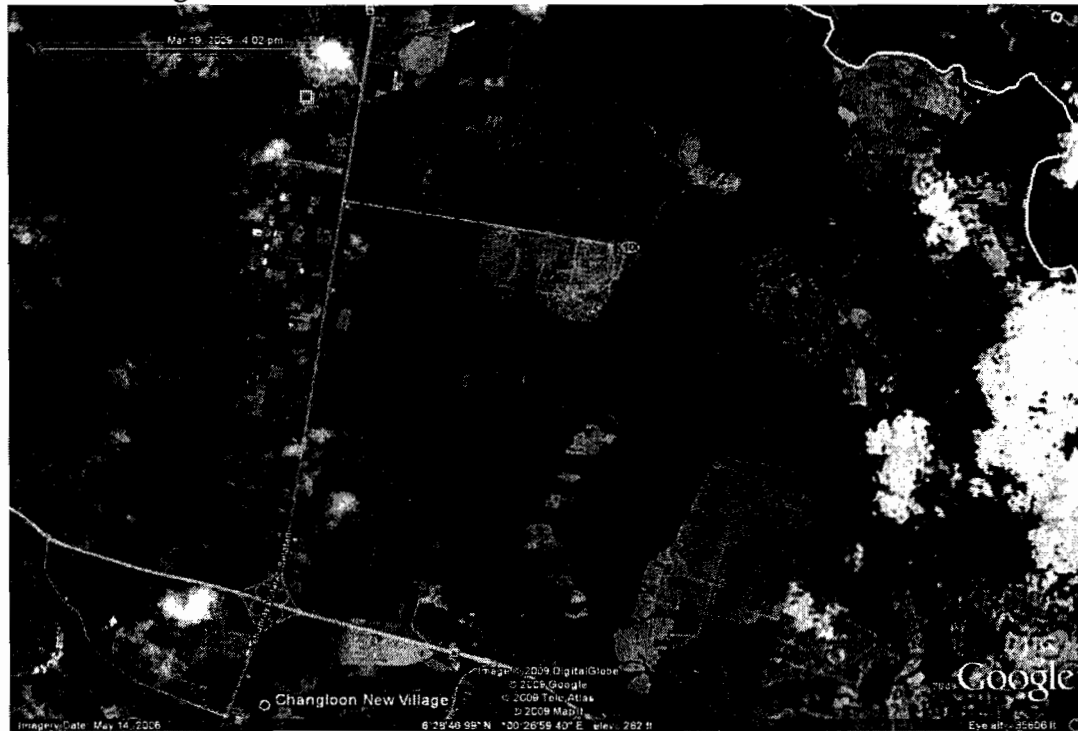
Entry Point Source	Bkt Kayu Hitam	Rantau Panjang	Padang Besar	Pengkalan Hulu	Pengkalan Kubur	Wang Kelian	Total Arrival	% (98.3)
Thailand	345,251	167,427	135,409	127,565	85,450	67,719	932,821	82.8
Indonesia	37,399	1,389	1,926	12,383	286	140	53,523	4.8
Singapore	20,490	980	682	980	198	55	23,385	2.1
United Kingdom	8,672	1,340	3,053	94	145	2,384	15,688	1.4
Phillipines	10,466	976	684	1,052	275	363	13,816	1.2
Laos	2,207	923	3,705	70	267	1,597	8,769	0.8
China	4,206	90	222	3,631	15	2	8,166	0.7
Vietnam	4,704	810	152	983	39	2	6,700	0.6
Germany	2,565	468	1,325	30	141	1,121	5,650	0.5
U.S.A	2,720	297	1,136	123	54	514	4,844	0.4
Sweden	2,315	293	611	10	29	11,21	4,379	0.4
Cambodia	581	3,243	80	46	52	4	4,106	0.4
Japan	2,250	358	1,164	154	12	77	4,015	0.4
India	2,315	38	300	1,180	4	1	3,838	0.3
Australia	2288	203	734	105	34	324	3,688	0.3
France	1,544	359	802	14	77	630	3,426	0.3
North Korea	1,864	124	993	302	34	84	3,401	0.3
Canada	1,583	297	630	43	27	393	2,973	0.3
Netherlands	1,304	48	577	12	30	246	2,217	0.2
Switzerland	940	155	348	4	33	346	1,826	0.2
Others	11,189	1,857	4,013	225	4,664	1,764	19,445	1.7
TOTAL	466,853	181,075	158,394	149,006	91,866	78,887	1,126,676	100
%	41.4	16.1	14.1	13.2	8.2	7.0	100%	

Source: Tourism Malaysia, 2008.

Plate 1. Rapid growth at Ban Danok



Plate 2. Changlun from satellite



Border Tourist Attractions

As Timothy (2001) emphasizes borders can be attractive on its own merit as a site rich in tourism resources such as the Niagara at the U.S.-Canadian border or the Mekong River Golden Triangle. Borders with their signage and icons contain borderlines which many who succumb to the "I've been there" syndrome i.e. the psychological desire to straddle the line and claim a territorial experience. Beside such propensities to collect claimed experience visitors to BKH go for shopping, either in Ban Danok on the Thai side or further in Sadao or Haat Yai. Some would try to savor that genuine Thai dishes while others go for entertainment, massage or sex. Often visitors get shortchanged in their quest for branded imitation items, or find that the food served is not suitable on religious grounds or owing to conservative taste buds. As Neil Leiper would describe an attraction the system is a combination of the nucleus or core feature, the consumers/gazers and information. We do not know enough on these simply because there have not been many studies addressing evaluation of tourist attractions at the border. Some studies, for e.g. Tepsongkroh (2005) was exploratory, perhaps too sanitized in completely avoiding any mention of sex as a cross-border attraction. Similarly Katiman and Zahasrawati, while presenting a useful analysis of shopping tourism did not address other components of the destination system. But these are useful starters, along with two or three other studies on border tourism in Brunei-Limbang, Betong and Batam. Malaysia has some 22 border checkpoints all of which are nested in border tourist zones, some densely occupied while others are still in the fledgling stage. There is clearly scope in pursuing evaluative research on border attractions, while also surveying tourist perceptions and behaviour.

Table 2. Images of the Bukit Kayu Hitam Cross-border Tourist Space

Attributes	Positive	Negative
Attractions	Good shopping opportunities. Wide range of Thai food items. Night life, entertainment, health.	Questionable quality goods Unsafe, immoral. Non-halal. Touts and hustlers
Accessibility	Good access on ASEAN highway. Relatively cheap transportation. A range of logistic facilities.	Traffic bottleneck at CIQ. Lawless, corruption. Restrictive & uncertain.
Availability	Negotiable/manueverable Basic services are available	Lack of information causes anxiety, uncertainty
Affordability	Currency exchange advantageous. Value-for-money goods & services. Duty-free complex, hypermart	Passport levy prohibitive. Cigarette/alcohol/flesh trade items are also cheap.
Agency	Public/private agencies present, Including IMT-GT. Unrestrictive Business environment.	Border situation encourages market abuses due to ineffective governance.
Accountability	CIQ authority provides security. Joint-border Committee to ensure enforcement of law and vigilante.	Power abuse by officers. No man's land syndrome encourages host-guest abuse.
Awareness	Low literacy delivers novelty. Gives adventure and thrill. Proximity leads to plenty of hands-on travel tips. Cheap guide service.	Linguistic/religious barriers lead to host-guest distance. Lacks maps and user-friendly Brochure simply unavailable. Information on shadowy acts not readily supplied.
Acceptability	Community accepts tourism. Friendly host communities.	Insurgents target urban hubs. Contrasting hospitality cultures makes IMT-GT cooperation naturally unbalanced.
Attentiveness	Excellent service quality by service providers will increase more visits to Thailand.	May lead to asymmetrical market situation which may not be sustainable.

Accessibility and logistics

With the opening of the Malaysian stretch of the ASEAN Highway in 1995 linking Singapore to Thailand accessibility has surged almost instantly so much so that there is a need to open a second route through Durian Burung in the east of Sintok. There are media reports of traffic bottlenecks at the border checkpoint, instances of abuse by service personnel, including alleged practice of taking bribe by uniformed personnel on both sides. Even if there were no basis for such allegations it reflects perceptions of the traveling public which still matters and is worth exploring.

The idea is to seek an understanding of both the negative and positive aspects of all the nine attributes so that efforts can be made to strengthen the positive role of the border while mitigating if not eliminating the negative features. Space does not allow for a complete coverage of all the nine factors which are presumed to be important individually but critical when viewed as part of a larger picture of destination development. Suffice it to say the opportunities for research on border tourism is wide open if only because it has hardly been started. Furthermore, border tourism is a relatively recent phenomenon, as recent as the emergence of the growth triangles whose development are still fraught with difficulties partly because not much is known on how border tourism evolves. This is a clear challenge for the academic fraternity on both side of the border; it can only be a starting point for further collaboration in the future. The first step is to agree to work together. Having once worked with colleagues from Hong Kong and the USA on a simple joint cross-country study I am quite convinced that this is a doable project within the context of IMT-GT academic collaboration.

High potential doable projects: The way forward

Beside the above-mentioned joint research project, the way forward would be to organize a brainstorming session on what can be done on a joint-venture basis. I would suggest at the outset that there is room for joint publication on cross-border tourism, an edited collection which provides opportunity for those interested in discussing and analyzing subjects related to this theme. In the light of the ubiquity of borders wherever one lives and work (Thailand may even have more cross-border gateway than Malaysia), the prospect of TEAM mobilizing an interested team to work on this project seems attainable. Cross-border travel can be an enriching element in the undergraduate program, provided it is carefully planned and executed on a consensual basis in the participating groups. It is called edutourism, cross-cultural immersion, international exchange etc. the idea is basically to expose students to new experiences away from the cosy (albeit boring) comfort of the home campus. Having traveled with a busload of ASEAN students touring Thailand for a week a decade ago in the company of Acharn Dr. Charnvit Kasetseri, I cannot overstate its educational value. Within the context of IMT-GT one of the proposals recommended by ADB consultants to the Malaysian government more than a decade ago was to organize such exchange program, citing a project profile involving a HRD venture to train students from Sumatra on English for hospitality purposes while undergoing their practicum in Penang.

I suspect we are gathered in UUM today and Haat Yai tomorrow for a purpose...a purpose we term as academic exchange on a win-win proposition. If the concept IMT-GT

is predicated on the notion that developing inwards from the periphery is more workable than the previous centre-driven approach of SCOT-ASEAN, then we should act on the cross-border theme immediately. After all, this is a relatively new theme in tourism research worldwide.

Conclusion

Gazing at an imagined agenda for cross-border collaboration from the comfort of my desk on the border, I see some useful growth points in research. We can start by collaborating in a baseline study of cross-border tourists. This can be couched in descriptive terms aiming at the familiar tourist profile study frame. At a more complicated level we can aim to interrogate the thoughts and concerns of the border visitors by deconstructing some of the issues raised in the positive-negative binary surrounding the 9A attributes sketched earlier. We can expect the results of such studies to not only enrich our understanding of tourists but also provide some common ground for evaluating the IMT-GT tourism promotion programs. In the course of gazing at others we may be able to constructively gaze at ourselves too. Picture below shows a completed CIQ complex at Durian Burung awaiting further progress on the Thai side.

Plate3. CIQ Complex at Durian Burung.



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